

Paradise Dive Club

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President's Log

Freeport, Bahamas

Michael Ring

President

Welcome to the New Year! Wow, it's 2010!?! Another year to explore underwater wonders. As for me, well my 2009 ended with a trip to Freeport in The Bahamas, to a place called Wyndham's Viva Fortuna Beach. Frankly, I was looking forward to the trip with great expectations as I had planned to do a shark-feeding dive. As the date approached the anticipation built higher and higher.

The travel, while long, was pleasant. We got to our destination safe and sound and checked into our resort lodging. It was too late to go to the dive shop to sign up for my dives, but I was exited none-the-less.

Sunday morning I opened the curtains and looked out to see dozens of sailboats outside our room. Not in the water, but right there on the ground in various states of assembly. It turns out that our resort was hosting the World Championships of the 49er Class sailboat racing, which was to start January 4. There were over 50

different nations competing, with over 60 two-man teams. I had never heard of that class before, but it was very interesting watching the crews set up their boats and prepare for the upcoming races.

After breakfast I went in to see what diving was available on property. The general plan was a two-tank morning dive boat, and a one tank afternoon boat. I was too late for that morning, so I just hung out and got to know the people in the office and found out about the way they ran their operation. They told me that all I needed to do on any given day was show up by 8:15 a.m. and sign in, or by 1:15 p.m. if I wanted to dive the afternoon. They offered Nitrox, which I decided to go with since I was hoping to do a lot of dives and wanted to cut down on the nitrogen exposure over time. They mix on property, so if you want Nitrox you have to give them 24 hours notice. I told the shop to plan on having 2 tanks per day, as I was hoping to do at least that many dives in the time I was there. The guy who did the mixing showed me where they kept the tanks and how to use their Nitrox analyzer. Once he was satisfied that I knew what I was doing, I was on my own. He showed me the "dry" room they had where I could hang my stuff to dry, etc. I grabbed my gear from the room, stored it, and then left for lunch.

My first dive was that afternoon. They had one pontoon boat that they use which holds about 20 divers, and they have 5 dive masters who rotate which dives they go out on. I checked in and grabbed my gear from the dry room. I followed the dive master to the boat landing, only to find it was right near my room. (Suggestion: If you go there to dive, leave your gear in your room on the deck or balcony. It was safe and a lot less lugging things back and forth.) They loaded the tanks for the divers and we were informally assigned a spot.

We loaded onto the boat off the beach, as

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there was no dock. There were about 6 other divers on the boat, mostly people associated with the 49er competition. Two of the competitors and their girlfriends were getting certified while in The Bahamas. They were from Finland, and were extremely friendly. In fact, everyone associated with the competition was a pleasure to be around. I got to know teams from Finland, Bermuda, Denmark, New Zealand, Australia, and one of the US teams. Great people. All of the were between 20 and 35 years old, and in great shape. They were more than eager to share information about their sport, and I listened with great interest.

Back to the diving. The conditions under the waves were wonderful. The water temp was between 77 and 80 degrees. The viz was between 60 and 100 feet at least. The reef was nice, with various tunnels and swim throughs to explore. There were thousands of fish of all varieties and sizes. We saw lobsters, green and speckled moray eels, lionfish, barracuda, sharks, grouper, etc., etc. And this was the first dive!

I signed up to do 2 dives on property every day after that except for Wednesday. So, bright and early each morning I got up, went to breakfast, and then geared up to hop on the boat. Tuesday I did another afternoon dive, as they were going to a place called "Shark Alley." We got into the water and saw several Caribbean Reef sharks right away. We descended to where the action was, and I counted about 12 of them. They ranged in size from 6 to 9 feet or so. They seemed a little interested in us, but not too menacing. They swam directly at us, and then moved away. Most of the divers were being a bit cautious, as there were some sharks that were more curious than the others, and they were plenty big enough to do some harm if they chose to. I was busy turning this way and that, both to keep my eye on all of them and to get some good photos of the dive. After a while the dive master indicated we were to swim away and explore the reef a bit. As I followed I made sure to keep an eye out for our finned friends to see what they were up to, but they tended to stay back by the area where we had descended to.

We swam around the reef exploring and then headed back to where the boat was. At that point we got back into the area where the sharks were, and I noticed that there seemed to be a few more of them, and the new ones were a little bigger than the others. I looked around and saw my Finnish friends doing some skills training with about nine 8-10 foot sharks circling around them within 10 feet or less. What a way to start your diving career! If you are not intimidated by that... then you can probably handle anything!

Wednesday I had arranged to go into town and dive with another shop called Unexco to do their shark feed dive. I got there a bit early for the 2:00 p.m. departure to give myself plenty of time to arrange for more Nitrox, and load onto the boat. There was a series of long lines at the counter, as the resort does diving, snorkel boats, and sightseeing trips, and they all sign in at the same counter. I got checked in and went with one of the dive masters to get my tank, then headed to the boat to gear up. We went out to the dive site (the same one I had done the day before, but these guys call it "Shark Junction"). We had six divers, and three dive masters. One was to swim with us as our guide. Another was the videographer, and the third was the lucky one: He was going to feed the sharks. The videographer and the feeder were getting into chain-mail dive suits for protection. In the back of my mind I thought: "What's gonna protect us?"

They gave us a briefing on what to do, and what not to do. They told us what the dive plan would be, and then we all got into the water. As we descended I looked down and saw that this time there were a lot more sharks. More than 30 of them! And many were larger than the day before. We probably had at least 5 that were between 10-12 feet. Ok, I thought. I can do this. Just don't get eaten.

The plan was simple. Descend to about 60 feet. Go over to the upside down hull of a small wreck. Turn around and kneel down next to it and wait for the action. Well, I am not the best at kneeling for extended periods, something about lack of flexibility. So I positioned myself at the end of the line, and sort of lay down, propping my camera arm on my right elbow. I put my camera into video mode and started filming.

The feeder came in with a plastic tube full of fish. He stationed himself about 10 feet in front of us and started the show. Needless to say, he attracted a great deal of attention. Immediately. The sharks were all over him. They circled. They nudged. They ate. He would pull out a fish and several of them would go after it. He would try to direct which one would get a fish, but the others were not having any part in the sharing concept. As I lay there filming the action, occasionally looking into the viewfinder to make sure that I was still aiming at the action. The sharks were swarming everywhere. They were vying for position to get a fish. They were circling over his head. They were circling over my head. They swam right up to me and over my forehead. They bumped into my shoulders. They grazed my mask. Their tails slapped my head. They were everywhere.

As time progressed my right arm started to feel a bit uncomfortable. I wanted to stretch it out. But in our pre-dive instruction they said not to reach your arm out as the sharks might bite it off. Remembering that good advice, I just stayed frozen, wondering how long we were going to be there. I figured if I wasn't supposed to reach out my arm that standing up was probably a bad idea too. So I waited, and filmed.

We stayed in that position for about 35 minutes in all. I was filming the entire time. At the end, the feeder moved off into the distance so that we could surface safely. As we did our 15-foot safety stop I looked down at the action. I saw another bigger shark come into the area, and hoped that it was not too disappointed in having missed out on the fish, as there was other food in the water.

When we all got back onto the boat the conversation was very animated. It was a fabulous dive. Everyone was commenting on how many sharks there were, and how none of us wanted to be the guy feeding the sharks. I would recommend this dive to anyone who wants a close shark encounter, in what seemed to be a fairly safe setting. I will say that I found out later that last year they did have one of the videographers killed by some of the sharks, which may be why they now wear the chain-mail suits also.

The remainder of the trip was doing dives in the various swim throughs and tunnels that abound in the region. We did do one very nice wreck dive, but the current that day was very intense.

We had to descend by pulling ourselves down the mooring line, and it was very difficult as the current wanted to tear our arms off. The only other issues were that the air temperature was much colder than I had expected, and the wind was brutal! The surface intervals between dives were freezing, as the boat offered no shelter from the wind at all. However, after the SI between dives, the water felt like jumping into a Jacuzzi, so that was nice.

I will say that I would love to go back and do more dives in the Bahamas. Just not in December/January.

New Stamp Issued

By Valerie Lent



On October 1, 2009, in Monterey, California, the Postal Service issued 44-cent **Nature of America: Kelp Forest** commemorative stamps.

This 2009 *Nature of America* issuance features a kelp forest off the central California coast. This is the 11th stamp pane in an educational series focusing on the beauty and complexity of major plants and animal communities in the United States. To illustrate the biodiversity of a kelp forest, artist John D. Dawson of Hilo, Hawaii, depicted more than 27 different species in his colorful acrylic painting.

PDC Thursday Night Dives!

To find out where the group will be diving, or to be added to the night dive e-mail list, sign up at http://groups.yahoo.com/group/PDC_midweek_dive, or send e-mail to PDC_midweek_dive-subscribe@yahoogroups.com

Membership

\$25/year for individuals, \$40 for families. Membership runs May-April and includes a monthly newsletter, free air-fills, and other benefits. For details or to join, contact Sharon Coffield at: membership@paradisediveclub.org.

Newsletter

Send newsletter items to Stuart Ponder at: webmaster@paradisediveclub.org

Website

www.paradisediveclub.org

Join the Coolest Club in Town!

1. Monthly meetings with entertainment.
2. Raffle prizes (we all need new dive stuff)
3. Great dive buddy pool
4. Beach and boat dives, AND weekly night dives
5. Club BBQs, and other activities
6. Free air-fills and gear discounts at local dive shops
7. Right to proudly wear the official PDC T-Shirt (nobody has a logo as cool as ours).

Dive Club Officers

President	Michael Ring	info@paradisediveclub.org
Vice President	Akiles Ceron	
Treasurer	Jim Axtell	
Secretary	John Kushwara	
Membership	Sharon Coffield	membership@paradisediveclub.org
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Webmaster	Stuart Ponder	webmaster@paradisediveclub.org
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Meeting Place

The February 23rd meeting will take place at
Petrini's Restaurant in Santa Barbara.
14 West Calle Laureles.